

## COLUMNISTS

## Clean heart means more than good manners

**Sunday's Readings:** (R3) Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23. (R1) Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8. (R2) James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27.

We are impressed, aren't we, when people show good manners? And we are turned off by the person who is rude or inconsiderate.

Walking into an office, a know-it-all salesman demanded to see the manager without delay.

The secretary informed him, "I'm sorry, he is not here. Can I help you?"

The salesman snapped, "I will deal with underlings. I'll wait until the manager returns."

"Very well," responded the secretary as she returned to her work.

After an hour passed, the salesman became impatient. Authoritatively he wanted to know, "How much longer do I have to wait?"

Demurely the secretary answered, "About two weeks. He went on vacation yesterday."

Good manners will take you a long way.

Do you know, though, that good manners is not the same as good religion? There are many people who have good manners whose hearts are corrupt and



a word  
for  
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

cold. The Pharisees and the experts in the law were like that. They washed their hands before eating; they washed their cups and jugs and kettles. They were well-mannered in the etiquette of the world, but their hearts were full of evil and corruption.

Suppose you were helping with the dishes. You dried a cup. It was nice and shiny and clean, but only on the outside; on the inside it was still all dirty and yucky. Would you drink from a glass like that? If you put juice or water into this dirty glass, the juice or water would become all dirty, too. It would probably taste bad, and it might even make you sick. No matter how clean this glass is on the outside, it can't be used until it's al-

so clean on the inside.

The Pharisees believed in being clean on the outside. They washed their hands a whole lot, and some of the religious leaders took baths twice every day and twice every evening. They believed that they couldn't enter the temple, or pray, unless they were clean on the outside.

But Jesus told the Pharisees that God wasn't too worried if they were clean on the outside. God cared more that they were clean on the inside, that their hearts were cleaned of sin. When we wash ourselves on the outside, we're getting rid of dirt and germs. But when we clean sin out of our lives by a good confession, we are becoming clean on the inside. And this is what is important to God.

Jesus' disciples were criticized for their lack of good manners. They failed to wash their hands before eating. Today that would be poor hygiene; in Jesus' day it was considered hygienic. The disciples were rather crude men by the standards of their own day. But Jesus saw their hearts and the possibilities in them, so he said to those who were criticizing them, "How accurately Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites when

he wrote, 'This people pays me lip service but their heart is far from me. Empty is the reverence they do me because they teach as dogmas mere human precepts.'"

By the phrase "they teach as dogmas mere human precepts" Jesus was saying that there is a difference between good manners and religion. Religion is not essentially a matter of external observance; it is a matter of the heart. The disciples of Jesus were not sophisticated men, but there was nothing wrong with their heart, and that was what counted with God.

One of the greatest threats to revealed religion is externalism. Externalism substitutes ritual acts, so easy to do, for purity of heart so hard to come by. Externalism cares about what people think; not about what God thinks. Externalism asks, "Does it look all right?" not "Is it all right?" Externalism never gets to the heart. Daily let us pray like David, "A clean heart create for me, O God" (Ps 51:12).

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

## Penitents should have choice between confession styles

Q. It seems that all parishes in our area are going to face-to-face confessions. I still like to go in "the box."

At a penance service I attended in Lent, there was no opportunity to confess in a confessional. I was so upset I walked out.

Isn't it possible to schedule one Saturday a month in the confessional for us who prefer it that way?

Going to confession in the confessional is the traditional practice of the church. It seems to me they should have kept it that way.

(Colorado)

A. It might be helpful to note first that your last statement isn't quite accurate. Confessionals as we know them are relatively recent in the Catholic Church.

They began probably with St. Charles Borromeo, archbishop of Milan, whose diocesan policies (about 1580) forbade priests to hear confessions of women "unless there is a divider between



question  
corner

BY FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

them."

Interestingly, introduction of the grill between priest and penitent had nothing to do with anonymity. That came later as a result of the separation, and the darkness, of the confessional.

The 1614 ritual for penance was the first to require a grill or screen to separate the priest from the penitent. This became part of the canon law of the church in 1918, lasting until the revision of these laws in 1983.

So the "tradition" of confessionals doesn't go back all that far.

Not only is a confessional screen no longer required; official procedures for this sacrament assume there is no screen or division between the person confessing and the priest.

After the penitent says a prayer for God's pardon, the priest "extends his hands, or at least his right hand, over the head of the penitent and pronounces the formula of absolution."

Other parts of the ritual (mutual prayer, reading of the Scriptures and so on) also obviously imply open space between the two persons.

These elements of the rite give us an idea of the type of space most proper for this sacrament (Introduction, Rite of Penance, 15-20).

Thus, according to the American bishops' commentary on the Rite of Penance, the most desirable location for individual confessions is a small chapel or room

where all this can be done with dignity and reverence.

The room should be designed to offer also the opportunity for anonymous confession if the penitent desires this option (Study Text 4, Rite of Penance; bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, pp. 24-25).

I hope this explains why practically all churches today have "reconciliation rooms." They allow the priest to minister the sacrament face-to-face, following the more open requirements of the ritual, and also permit the other option if desired.

No priest has a right to deny penitents both choices. Even in communal penance services such as you experienced, it is easily possible to respect that choice.

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Father Dietzen is the pastor of Holy Trinity Church, 704 N. Main St., Bloomington, IL 61701. Questions may be addressed to him there.

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